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ABSTRACT

Maria Montessori believed that preschool children were capable of practicing an elementary form of democracy, could direct their own learning and discipline themselves, and were able to thoughtfully control their behavior for the benefit of the group. She believed also that it was necessary to prepare the environment so that democracy would begin to evolve naturally. Toward this end Montessori provided multi-age grouping, limited amounts of materials, a low pupil/teacher ratio, and real tools rather than toys. She encouraged self-discipline by providing variety in learning activities and materials and, for younger students, "exercises in practical life" to promote a feeling of security. Teachers who value the qualities promoted by the Montessori approach and who wish to promote them in their classrooms must be willing to be facilitators or collaborators rather than directive teachers and must trust children to work with real materials in caring for the room, model appropriate behavior, trust children to create their own concept of community, and treat children with dignity. Peer teaching, mixed-age grouping, student-initiated grouping, nonpunitive/nonauthoritarian group management, techniques promoting self-discipline, goal-directed selection of materials, use of real tools in structured activities, and gradual implementation of activities with developmentally appropriate materials are eight of Montessori's ideas which can be adapted to regular classrooms. (RH)

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PRESCHOOL DEMOCRACY

Ideas from Montessori

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PRESCHOOL DEMOCRACY

Ideas from Montessori

There are questions that need to be asked as we think about preparing children to live in a democracy. For example, how best can we prepare them? Do we simply assign weekly "monitors" to keep the room clean and the gerbils fed? Could we instead trust the children enough to let them decide their own laws and discipline, to direct their own learning, to care for each other's welfare as well as the environment?

A further question that must be asked is, how soon is too soon? When is it too late? Traditionally, we've believed that the youngest children are not yet ready for the heavy responsibilities of democratic organization. The question then becomes, when are children ready to practice classroom democracy, or should they simply study government until such time as they have graduated and can register to vote? Even high school teachers have a tradition of assuming that it is yet too early to trust students with creating their own learning and social environments, with determining their own rules and discipline. So, although we speak of "preparation for democracy" throughout the school years, we may send students into the real world of doing these things without ever having given them any real experience.

Although the proper timing and the degree of freedom to be offered young children is still a subject of debate, there has been since the early part of this century, one approach to classroom democracy that provides training for children from the age of three or even less. Montessori (1969)

believed that preschool children were capable of practicing an elementary form of democracy, could direct their own learning, discipline themselves, and "no longer act thoughtlessly, but put the group first and try to succeed for its benefit..." (p. 232). Her attitudes toward children's capabilities did not grow from a philosophical viewpoint imposed on a classroom situation; rather, it grew from her close observation of children over a period of years, in which she discovered that even the very youngest among them were capable of forming an "embryonic society." She determined that democracy would not be forced on the children, any more than it should be taken from them. The only way in which it should be encouraged would be to prepare the environment in such a way that democracy would begin to evolve naturally.

Preparing for Democracy in a Montessori Classroom

The environment was prepared in a variety of ways in order to encourage the beginnings of democracy. A close-knit community was valued by Montessori. To achieve this, she placed children of varying ages together in classes. When the age differences became too great to keep the children in one classroom, she might separate them, but still allow freedom of movement between classrooms as the children desired. What she saw develop was a feeling of family, a community in which participants were responsible for the welfare of others.

Responsibility for and caring about others as well as unselfishness were all qualities that Montessori viewed as necessary for the evolution of democracy. Toward this end she provided not only the multi-age grouping just discussed, but limited numbers of materials, a low pupil/teacher ratio and real tools rather than toys. Each of these worked in different ways to

achieve similar goals.

Limited numbers of materials forced children to share and to learn to be unselfish. Originally, this aspect of a Montessori classroom existed because of necessity; there simply weren't the necessary funds for more than one of anything. Montessori then observed that this necessity was encouraging children to share harmoniously, and to share to a greater extent than any amount of moralizing would probably ever accomplish. Thus, even in times of affluence, a policy of limited materials was in effect.

The low teacher/pupil ratio was also an outcome of dealing with an early lack of funding. It became however, an advantage in that children were forced to care for one another. The youngest members turned with trust to the older for help, thus leading the older children to develop qualities of responsibility, caring and unselfishness.

The refusal to use toys for make-believe or fantasy experiences has been a controversial issue regarding Montessori classrooms. It is not the concern of this article to discuss this issue except as it affects the children's growth toward democracy. With a classroom full of real tools provided for its upkeep, children were encouraged to really care for their environment rather than to pretend to care for a dollhouse. The whole idea was to foster responsibility, community pride, caring for others, an understanding of the requirements of real life.

The subject of discipline was also of concern to Montessori. An authoritarian mode, she believed, was more in consonance with authoritarian governments than it was suitable preparation for democracy. On the other hand, permissiveness could lead to anarchy. Again, she turned to the prepared environment as a means of providing a natural discipline; thus, both authoritarianism and anarchy could be avoided, leaving democracy as

the logical next step. Self-discipline, necessary to foster in preparing for a democratic ideal, was encouraged by providing a broad enough variety of learning activities and materials that children who misbehaved could simply be redirected to something of interest to them. A second technique for fostering self-discipline was aimed at the youngest children, usually three-year-olds, particularly when they first entered the class. This technique involved the so-called "exercises in practical life" and included activities such as shoe polishing, water pouring, and table washing. The instructions for these activities were rigid; no creativity was allowed. The purpose was to give new children a feeling of security, of knowing what was expected of them in a new, strange environment. Because the children could thus feel more at peace with themselves they would, presumably, be less inclined to be discipline problems. Further, once the teacher's observations revealed that a child did feel secure, other activities that allowed more freedom could be introduced, paving the way toward the development of self-discipline.

Adapting Montessori's Ideas to Other Settings

A Montessori classroom is quite different from most nursery schools and kindergartens. Is it possible to adapt her environment and social development techniques to other types of classrooms? Or,of equal importance, should the environment and techniques be adapted? A look at the qualities Montessori expected young children to develop should help answer these questions. Teachers may then decide for themselves if they value in small children the same qualities she did. These include:

-Independence, especially from the need for an authority figure

-Responsibility for the welfare of the group

-Responsibility for care of the environment

-The ability to discipline one's self

-Self-direction in the learning process

-Helpfulness, particularly in regard to younger children

-Unselfishness and patience in sharing

-A feeling of competence and self-worth

Possibly not all, but certainly some of these qualities are valued by most teachers of young children. For some teachers the qualities will appear desirable on paper, but in application seem unattainable. What is needed in many cases is for the teacher to be able and willing to give up some of the functions usually associated with teaching. In other words, before teachers can ask the children to take on responsibilities, self-direction, etc. they must be willing to relinquish some of their own power in this regard. Teachers must be willing to do a number of things in order to adapt the Montessori ideas to their classrooms:

First they must give up any need for children to be dependent on them. They must learn instead to share a child's joy in discovering that, "I can do it myself!"

They must be willing to be facilitators or callaborators rather than directive teachers.

They should trust the children to work with real materials in really caring for the room. The teacher should be left with little work to do in maintaining equipment and in keeping materials clean and in order.

Teachers must model appropriate behavior. Children imitate teachers anyway. They should have democratically based qualities to imitate.

Trusting the children to create their own concept of community is essential. This means that there will be fewer discussions on such concepts as sharing and helping, and more use of the environment to foster them naturally.

Teachers should not expect, in young children, a truly democratic approach to their social life. They can only begin to grow out of their authority orientation, and are, in Montessori's words, a "society in embryo."

Above all, the children must be treated with dignity. This means practicing the Golden Rule: they must not be treated condescendingly, talked down to, spanked, or otherwise disciplined imperiously.

Teachers who are able to agree with the qualities to be encouraged in young children, and with the responsibilities listed for their roles should find it possible to adapt Montessori ideas to their early childhood classrooms.

Ideas for Adapting Montessori to the Classroom

Before discussing the ideas, one word of caution is in order: do not expect from these suggestions precise recipes, games, learning activities etc. They must be adapted: to your classroom, to your particular age groups and types of children. You should find ideas that can be adapted to the environment you are already in.

1. Help the children learn to teach each other. If one is greatly talented on the jungle gym, suggest she help another child who is fearful. If someone sets up an impressive array of dominoes to be knocked down, suggest he help another who has not as yet mastered the "domino theory." Be sure, however, that every child in the class has an opportunity to be good at

something, and to help others. At the same time, encourage children to feel free to ask for help when they need it. A spirit of helping each other in the classroom will usually bring this about naturally.

2. Attain the mixed-age idea even though you have a single-age class. Invite younger brothers and sisters to class, even if it's for a short time. Discuss in advance ways in which to make them comfortable. Invite children in higher grades to come work or play with your pupils. If children with special needs have been mainstreamed into your classroom, be sure the other students understand the best way to care for and play with them. Usually they will simply model your own behavior and need little direction. Above all, resist any inclinations to divice your classroom into ability groups.

3. Let the children choose when to be social and when it's better to work or play alone. This may be achieved in part by creating an environment that contains activities designed for individual participation as well as others that automatically reflect the need for a group. Don't expect too much in the way of total group attentiveness. When possible, draw off a small group from the complete one to talk and work with and let the others join when they're ready. Remember, these children are at a stage in which they can prepare to think as a group. If you force the issue you will only encourage the continuation of an authority-follower relationship, which will hinder progress toward independence, rather than encourage it.

4. Find ways to achieve group management without resorting to punishments and other authoritarian modes. One Montessori teacher trainer told her students, "I don't care if the children are climbing the walls - so long as you know how to get them off the walls!" Her method, learned from Montessori, was to survey an increasingly chaotic classroom and spot the

most normalized children. ("Normalized" to Montessori meant the most socially mature, self-confident, self-directed children.) Speak to each one individually and quietly, redirecting their activities as necessary, as these are the children for whom redirection is most likely to work. Then follow on through with the entire class, saving the most troublesome for last. Ordinarily, it isn't necessary to speak to more than a few of the most "normalized" children, as they become the models for the rest to follow. This method is the reverse of that found in most classrooms, in which the most problematic children are targeted first. Its advantage is that the children, to a larger extent, are left to create their own discipline. A fringe benefit is that it's a lot less wearing on the teacher.

5. Find ways to help individual students achieve self-discipline without resorting to authoritarian modes. This means resisting the very normal impulse to lecture, implore, berate. A child who is out of sorts because, "There's nothing to do," needs help in decision making. Indicating that the room is obviously crammed with things to do may be simply overwhelming for him. Helpful comments might be, "Let me help you choose. You may either _____or_____." At this point, two activities to choose from are plenty. This may have to be followed up with, "You don't like either of those choices? Then you choose something....You can't? Then, let's return to my two suggestions." The key is to stay with the child until he or she has made physical contact with a chosen activity.

For times when there is friction between a couple of children, choice in the environment may again be used as a means of discipline. "You two are having a hard time being friends today, aren't you? How about each of you choosing an activity that you can do alone or with someone else for

awhile?". This may be followed up by comments such as those in the preceding paragraph. With either situation, it may be noted that the focus of attention shifts from whatever inner turmoil exists onto less troublesome tangible objects. Keeping this in mind, variations on these two situations may be created ad infinitum.

6. Choose materials for the classroom with an eye to providing children with both self-confidence and a sense of daring. In other words, have some materials that are quite structured and others that are more open-ended. Children who are in need of reassurance or in need of learning self-discipline can be directed toward the structured activities for awhile. Others will have opportunity for directing their own learning with the more creative and open-ended activities.

Note: some children will always need more structure, but should not be deprived of the creative materials. Some children will ordinarily be self-directive and creative, but will on occasion feel out of sorts with their worlds. Guiding them to the structured activities gives them a temporary refuge, some possibly needed confidence, a lessening of demands on them.

7. Show children that you respect their abilities by providing them with real tools for real work. This doesn't mean you have to do away with the doll corner or playhouse. It does suggest that real brooms, mops, dust-rags, etc. should be provided and used by all. If you want to really model the Montessori approach, use these tools as the very structured activities we've just spoken of. Design a method for the use of each tool and be sure that all children use it in the designated manner. One step in the method will include putting the tools away; it is important to think

about the clean-up as related to the main activity. Simply viewing clean-up as an integral part of all activities serves as an aid to classroom management.

8. Freedom, democracy, and independence should be allowed to emerge gradually; they should not be offered, carte blanche, immediately, or anarchy is more likely to result. At the beginning of a school year, the shelves should be on the empty side. Begin by showing how materials are to be used and cared for, with the structured, real-life tools as a good starting place. Gradually add materials until the room is as full as you care for it to be. Materials that are abused may just quietly be removed for awhile. Materials that are enormously popular need not be provided in multiples; these are the ones that will naturally supply lessons in sharing.

Be sure the materials are appropriate to the developmental levels of your children. If the children you teach are quite small provide materials that allow for individualism and parallel play. As children get to be five and six, add to these materials those that work better as group projects. This allows the children to begin to move into the more sociable stage of the early elementary child.

Group experiences should also reflect a knowledge of evolving stages. For the smaller children keep total group experiences to a minimum and have them brief. Five year olds can usually communicate in a large group for longer periods. They are sometimes even able to run their own meetings with the teacher nearby but not participating.

A Conclusion and a Foreward

The ideas that have just been discussed really will work. It is possible to adapt Montessori ideas to other settings, and small children

are capable of creating their own "embryonic societies." Further, it isn't necessary to adopt every one of the suggestions for teacher qualities or all of the teaching ideas. Start where you are; you will probably find that you have already adapted and adopted a number of the suggestions. Once you have identified those, decide how best to go forward in your classroom with your children using your own teaching style.

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